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ABSTRACT

Researchers are urged to guard against presumption, and to focus on the issues gradually, as they emerge under observation. Naturalistic evaluation studies represent an interaction between a research viewpoint and a field activity. There is uniqueness to the research team's predilection, and uniqueness to the site. Progressive focusing requires that the researcher be well acquainted with the complexities of the problem before going to the field, but not too committed to a study plan. It is accomplished in multiple stages: first observation of the site, the further inquiry, beginning to focus on the relevant issues, and then seeking to explain. (BW)

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The Art of PROGRESSIVE FOCUSING*

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I will begin sharing a collection of thoughts about Progressive Focusing by quoting a well-known author advising a group of young scientists:

> "Gradualness! About this most important condition of fruitful scientific work, I never can speak without emotion. Gradualness, gradualness, gradualness. From the very beginning of your work school yourselves to severe gradualness in the accumulation of knowledge."1

The man who advised them, and us, to guard against presumption, was Ivan Petrovich Pavlov. For revealing his learners to be so susceptible to the mechanical processes of conditioning, Pavlov became an antichrist among humanists. But this advice should ring a bell: to school ourselves to severe gradualness in the accumulation of knowledge.

In our graduate schools we beg our students to come to understand a problem well before designing a study, before spending precious time in the field. Whether we emphasize a preordinate or responsive approach, we want a good preliminary understanding of the potential issues. We urge our students to be ready. There is too little time to learn the complex issues once we reach the field. We have to be prepared, so we say.

But the feeling among many reformist educational-evaluation specialists has been that we have been too prepared, too committed to a plan, too fixated upon certain variables, as we begin gathering the data.

In 1972, at the University of Edinburgh, Malcolm Parlett and David Hamilton, authored a paper entitled, "Evaluation as Illumination, A New Approach to the Study of Innovatory Programs."2 In it they spoke at length about the importance and complexity of the learning milieu. They spoke about three stages at which illuminative investigators observe; inquire further; and then seek to explain. Parlett and Hamilton went on:

> "Obviously the three stages overlap and functionally interrelate. The transition from stage to stage, as the investigation unfolds, occurs as problem areas become progressively clarified and re-defined. The course of the study cannot be charted in advance. Beginning with an extensive data base, the researchers systematically reduce the breadth of their enquiry to give more concentrated attention to the emerging issues.

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> This 'progressive focusing' permits unique and unpredicted phenomena to be given due weight. It reduces the problem of data overload; and prevents the accumulation of a mass of unanalyzed material."

I believe this is the only reference to "progressive focusing" in that paper and I am not aware if they ever felt it needed further discussion. Let us, though, examine the concept for a few minutes.

The illuminative evaluator, the naturalistic enquirer, the emic-issue ethnographer, takes the vow of postponement, waiting, to find at the site, the language, actions, beliefs, and concerns to be the target of study. At the outset they are to be sensitive to what concepts and concerns might become eligible for study, but to postpone the choice until well acclimated to the scene.

Still, they have to have what David Ausubel called "organizers," the pivotal idea, the key concept, a basis for understanding a great many happenings.3

We all have advance organizers. We could not wipe our minds clean if we wanted to. We will ever have presumptions. We need to identify some things we will particularly be alert to observe. Lou Smith borrowed the term from Malinowski: "fore-shadowing questions." At the outset of each field study we prepare a list of ideas or problems that may turn out to be important. We try to agree in advance to abandon these questions if they fail to be salient. Even those questions that reveal our own cleverness, those titilating a client or audience, we pledge to ignore--and turn to matters more pertinent to the experience at the site.

I think Parlett and Hamilton wanted us to take to the site: a rich background of generalizations about human conditions, and a storehouse of particularistic data for comparison purposes, and notions about what kinds of questions are more or less important to various audiences. That baggage we would take, focused but not indelibly focused. We would commit ourselves to decide only gradually the activities, variables, and issues for special attention.

This sounds like pretty good advice, but my students find it quite difficult to follow. And so do I--because the issues emerge, oh, so slowly; showing up in some spots but not in others; and with twists and nuances that confuse. There in the field we learn a great deal about what is going on and what people think about things, but those ideas seldom sort neatly into piles for further study or chapter writing. Some clusters begin to show, but already it is time to write up the final report.

And in the crunch we may rely pretty much on our initial presumptions.

In an occasional study we have a couple of years to focus "progressively." That was the case with our Case Studies in Science Education.4 In your hands you should have a handout which identifies--over time--the CSSE issues. Since the issues were recorded for various purposes there is not as much correspondence among the ten lists as there should be.

To start with, in August '75, the RFP from the National Science Foundation listed questions for the case study workers to pursue, noting that the answers should triangulate with other status-study research going on. These categories of information were helpful in setting boundaries around the study, allowing a great deal of room for subsequent foci.

At the outset (July, 1976) we at CIRCE had three compound foreshadowing questions guiding entry into the selected science classrooms. From the RFP we stressed budget, teaching materials, teacher preparation, and student learning--adding a number of particulars not mentioned in the RFP.

By November we had four or five observers in the field, generating the first feedback. We started to identify which issues might be suitable for "scenarios," i.e., typical problem situations which could be used for standardized interviewing and also for a national survey to be undertaken when the field work was finished. We recognized that such a list of issues might ultimately be the same as our chapter headings. We wanted to help the list evolve and improve.

Let me go down the November 1976 list one-by-one with a comment (according to present recollection):

Budget cuts. An issue prominent at sites, but not looming as large as expected.

Articulation (need for uniformity place to place and from year to year). Emerging, not anticipated as important.

Back to Basics. Anticipated, being confirmed as major one.

Math Problems. Anticipated, easy to get teachers talking on this one, but issue of special interest to the evaluators.

Mastery. Not so much discussed, of interest to CSSE folks.

Theory/Practice. Anticipated big, turned out to be of little interest at sites.

Socialization. Starting to look like a big answer for the demise of NSF curriculum reform program.

Elitism. If worded so, a stinging question, subsurface usually, yet of little concern.

I cannot take time to comment on these separate issues at later stages of the study. If you choose to look carefully you will find that some issues persisted, some emerged, some faded. Many issues of most interest to the curriculum theorist and district curriculum coordinator failed to be recognized by our observers at the sites.

In May 1977, when I circulated an "early outline" of possible final-report chapter-titles, Terry Denny chided me for still seeing what I saw at the beginning, for "regressive focusing" you might say. Even after a year in the field the picture was hazy. It was difficult to find a dominant structure of issues across sites. It was easy to argue that the issues identified for organizing the final report were in fact important findings in perhaps half our sites, but our team could have settled on several other configurations. And other teams would have found the same case records to be telling of issues we did not respond to.

It is increasingly apparent that particularly with naturalistic evaluation studies we are presenting an interaction between a research viewpoint and a field activity. There is uniqueness to the research team's predilection, and uniqueness to the site. There are alternative stories to be told, even amid hopes for generalization. We find that some audiences want us to bend every effort to make our view as typical of other researchers as we can, and to tell the one story that best represents what happened at the site. But other audiences recognize that we sacrifice special insights by striving for uniformity, for the "typical." In the end, pretty much, we tell the story that seems most meaningful to ourselves.

The choice of "most meaningful" is a terribly subjective choice. We have numerous opportunities to check out bits and pieces with other researchers, with representatives of audiences, with program staff and others. Valuable as those negotiations can be, particularly for correcting erroneous or offensive inclusions, they are weak grounds for "progressive focusing." We rely mostly on intuition.

Progressive focusing is a slogan, a good slogan. It indicates our desire to leave observations and interpretations open. We sacrifice the increased power of instruments and protocols based on early delimitation. We can gain in relevance, timeliness. What changes evolve in focus, narrowing the spotlight or shifting it elsewhere, remain a very subjective choice, open to challenge or reinforcement by others. But these others seldom have the field experience, in composite, even if they are in the field themselves. The RESEARCHER X SITE interaction remains something quite unique in each naturalistic evaluation study.

Progressive focusing signals our commitment to gradualness, a partial effort to control presumption. May we salivate to emerging issues.

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1. Pavlov, Ivan. Bequest to the Academic Youth of Soviet Russia, 1936.

2. Parlett, M. and Hamilton, D. Evaluation as illumination: A new approach to the study of innovatory programs. Occasional Paper No. 9, Centre for Research in the Educational Sciences University of Edinburgh, 1972. Reprinted in Gene V. Glass, ed. Evaluation Studies Review Annual. Volume 1, Beverly Hills, SAGE Publications, 1976. 140-157

3. Ausubel, David P. The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning, NY. Grune and Stratton 1963.

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The Evolution of Issues in the CSSE Project

Questions raised in the RFP by NSF — August, 1975

What is the current status of...
- ...science education role and function?
- ...differences in practice in science, math, and social studies?
- ...the review and selection of teaching materials?
- ...classroom teaching intents and effectiveness?
- ...student outcomes?
- ...evaluation of teachers and students?
- ...the use of laboratory materials?
- ...the use of out-of-school resources?
- ...the budgetary support for science education?
- ...course improvement efforts?
- ...individualized instruction in science?
- ...science teacher inservice training?

Foreshadowing questions recognized by staff at CSSE outset — July, 1976

How is science being taught?
- ..curriculum and style, books and materials?
- ...what is the relationship among courses?
- ...how well are teachers and other responsible people prepared?
- ...what are students learning, and where?

What are the current conceptualizations of science in science courses?
- ...a body of organized knowledge
- ...a process of inquiry
- ...an appreciation of one's world

What currently are the encroachments upon the science program?
- ...budget cutbacks
- ...emphasis on basic skills
- ...emphasis on bilingual programs
- ...activism of parent groups
- ...teacher-union confrontation with administration
- ...emphasis on mastery of particular objectives
- ...desegregation problems
- ...hostility among student subgroups
- ...diminished respect for science in the culture

Identification of "scenarios" for questioning CSSE interviewees — November, 1976

- Budget cuts
- Science course-to-course articulation
- Emphasis on "back to the Basics"
- Student problems learning math
- Emphasis on mastery of particular objectives
- Conflict between practice (teacher view) and theory (professor view)
- Constraints on teaching social problems
- Elitism in science education

Preliminary findings of CSSE field workers — December, 1976

- Budget problems, public dissatisfaction with education generally
- Teacher-union militancy
- Constraints imposed by government; homogenization; falling teacher authority
- Nonschool science-education opportunities not being utilized
- Inadequacies of teacher inservice education
- Widespread student problems in learning math
- Physics and chemistry only for the most able students
- Science curriculum not abreast of even popular science developments

Issues seeking further validation for CSSE assimilation — May, 1977

Budget problems, reassignment of teachers, more emphasis on management
Low public priority on science education, except for college admissions
Cry for more vocational approach, more relevance to youngsters' lives
Lack of parent activism
Back to the Basics
Desire for instruction aimed at mastery of particular objectives
Classroom management problems, too many "unteachable" students
Lack of a sound diagnostic remediation system anywhere, rhetoric notwithstanding
Heavy reliance on textbooks
Teachers traditionalistic, skeptical; divided on "hands on" vs directed learning
Teachers objecting to social programs such as Headstart and Family Service
Teacher emphasis on moralisms, work-ethic, conformity, etc.

Final Questionnaire "scenarios" — May, 1977

Budget cuts, teacher reassignments
Course to course articulation, uniformity
Back to the Basics, teaching for mastery
Diagnostic teaching, math problems, practice vs theory
Classroom management problems, pedagogical styles and classroom atmosphers
Teacher support systems, inservice training, summer institutes
Constraints on teaching social problems, taboos
Elitism in science education, aims of general education

Assimilation chapter titles of the final report, early outline — May, 1977

Conditions of Education Today
Stability and Change in Science Education
Support Systems for Classroom Instruction
The K-12 Curriculum
Pluralism and Uniformity
Student Learning
Conceptualizations in Science
The School and the Community

Assimilation chapter titles of the final report, rough draft — October, 1977

The Context of Precollege Education in America Today
The Various Aims of Science Education
The K-12 Curriculum
Pluralism and Uniformity
Student Learning
The Teacher in the Classroom
The School and the Community

Assimilation chapter titles of the final report, final copy — January, 1978

The Various Aims of Science Education
The K-12 Curriculum
Pluralism and Uniformity
Student Learning
The Teacher in the Classroom
The School and the Community

Primary findings identified in the CSSE Executive Summary — January, 1978

The teacher is the key, much more than the school, materials, etc.
There are two "basic" teachings in school: reading and math
Math, science, and social studies remain separate domains
Socialization of students was a pre-emptive aim of most teachers
Much of the teaching in science is text-book bound
Articulation of courses and uniformity are called for but not wanted
There is a low public priority placed on science education